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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SARAJEVO 000863

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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - CHURCH AGREEMENT SPAT ALLOWS SERBS TO
PLAY IDENTITY POLITICS

REF: 07 SARAJEVO 2316

Classified By: Michael J. Murphy. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On May 7, Bosniak member of the Tri-Presidency Haris Silajdzic's vetoed on legal grounds a bilateral agreement between Bosnia and the Serb Orthodox church. Since then, senior Republika Srpska (RS) leaders have gone on the offensive, defending the right of Serbs to practice their faith against what they have characterized as a Bosniak attempt to assert "cultural hegemony" in Bosnia. The Federation House of Peoples will meet on May 16 and is expected to uphold Silajdzic's veto. On May 14, RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik announced that the RS government would help fund construction of a large Orthodox church overlooking Sarajevo in commemoration of Serb "suffering" during the 1992-1995 Sarajevo siege, claiming that "thousands" of Serbs were killed during the war by the "Sarajevo regime." Dodik's statements were part of an ongoing effort to recast events of the war, and highlight alleged crimes and perceived injustices committed against the Serbs reminiscent of claims made the Serb Democratic Party (SDS)(Reftel). Undoubtedly, Dodik and others in the Serb leadership are eager to exploit the political opportunity Silajdzic provided them to pose as "defenders of the Serbs" and highlight claims of Serb victimization at the hands of the Bosniaks, but in doing so they risk further polarizing the political scene here and encourage a backlash from Bosniaks and Croats, particularly over the decision to construct the Sarajevo church. END SUMMARY

CHURCH AGREEMENT FACES SILAJDZIC VETO

12. (SBU) On May 14, Serb member of the Tri-Presidency Nebojsa Radmanovic urged members of the Bosniak caucus of the Federation House of Peoples (HoP) not to uphold Silajdzic's veto of an agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and Bosnia. The Federation HoP is scheduled to take up the veto on May 16, and is widely expected to uphold it. Silajdzic exercised his right to veto the agreement on May 7. He argued that the Presidency lacked the constitutional authority to conclude what amounted to a bilateral treaty with a non-state entity such as the Orthodox Church, adding that unlike the Vatican, the Serbian Orthodox Church was not a sovereign state. Silajdzic said that the Law on Religious Freedom and the Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities in BiH gives the Presidency authority to conclude agreements with religious communities, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, and that he would be prepared to sign such

an agreement.

13. (C) The agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church had already been approved by parliament and the Council of Ministers, and has the support of Radmanovic and Croat Presidency member Zeljko Komsic. The agreement, as drafted, is nearly identical to an agreement signed between Bosnia and the Holy See, and guaranteed the Orthodox Church the freedom to worship, construct churches, perform religious education services among other provisions. (Note: This apparent "cut and paste" job is part of the problem, since the agreement with the Holy See is a treaty. Silajdzic had raised these concerns with other members of the Presidency and publicly as early as August 2007. End Note) Radmanovic cast Silajdzic's veto as attempt by one ethnic group in Bosnia to assert "cultural hegemony" over other peoples, and deny them the freedom of worship. Radmanovic stressed that it was imperative that all citizens of Bosnia recognize that Bosnia is a multiconfessional and multicultural union.

CHURCH FOR SERB "SUFFERING"

14. (C) At a May 14 press conference RS PM Milorad Dodik announced that his government will provide financial support for the construction of a Serb Orthodox church on Zlatiste, a hill overlooking the city of Sarajevo. Dodik made the announcement after meeting with representatives of war veterans, prisoners' of war and other associations, including the Serb Movement of Independent Associations (SPONA). The church would replace earlier plans to construct a large cross

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on the same site, where Serb gun emplacements were located during the 1992-1995 Sarajevo siege. When plans for the cross were announced they provoked widespread criticism from Bosniaks, who labeled it a "provocation," and from the international community, including the U.S. and OHR. (Note: The Ambassador raised our concerns about the cross with Dodik on March 14. End Note.) Dodik declared that "construction of the church could not be labeled a provocation," adding, "we know that several thousand Serbs died at the hands of the regime that ruled Sarajevo during the war." Branimir Stokich, President of SPONA, said that the names of 6,200 Serbs who died in Sarajevo will be inscribed in the church.

DODIK LOOSE WITH NUMBERS, REVIVES SDS SARAJEVO MYTHS

15. (C) Dodik's reference to Serb casualties in the Sarajevo siege is part of his recent rhetorical pattern of stressing and exaggerating Serb victimization during the 1992-1995 conflict. According to the highly regarded Research and Documentation Center (RDC), 4,075 Serb civilians were killed during the war, 1,091 of these were killed in the Sarajevo region during the war (not "thousands" as Dodik suggested, let alone the misleading precise 6,200 Dukic claimed). Though some of Sarajevo Serbs were killed by rogue Bosniak or Croat commanders, the credible experts believe the numbers are low. As one Western analyst who has studied the RDC figures put it recently, "The conclusion is inescapable: the single largest killer of Serb civilians during the war was the Serb siege of Sarajevo." In recent months Dodik has also publicly and privately (as he did with visiting Ambassador Holbrooke in April) revived the old SDS line that Sarajevo Serbs were forced to flee Sarajevo during and after the war, and questioned why the Bosniaks and the international community have not sought "justice" for them. Dodik again neglects to note that most Serbs were "forced" out of Sarajevo in 1995-1996 by Serb paramilitary units acting under the orders of the RS leadership.

COMMENT: SILAJDZIC ALLOWS SERBS TO PLAY IDENTITY POLITICS

16. (C) There is a certain irony in the openly atheist Dodik

and Radmanovic acting as defenders of the faith, but their recent statements regarding the agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church and plans to build a church overlooking Sarajevo have a political logic. Silajdzic may be on firm legal ground in his objections to a bilateral agreement with the church, but his decision to veto the agreement is politically tone deaf. By doing so he has provided the RS leadership with an opportunity to assert that Bosniaks do not respect the position of Serbs in the country. Dodik and Radmanovic have gladly taken it to strengthen their standing among Serb nationalists. Despite Dodik's assertion, the decision to build the church is unnecessarily provocative, and his rhetoric about the Sarajevo Serbs is insensitive and inaccurate and will likely provoke a Bosniak backlash. Bosniak, Croat and Serb residents of Sarajevo went through a horrific four year siege. They will not look favorably on an Orthodox Church commemorating Serb suffering standing over the city.

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